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ABSTRACT

The average worktime lost in 1967 because of illness or injury for persons 17 years of age or older was 5.6 days for women and 5.3 days for men. Women lost more time because of acute illness, but men were more likely to be absent because of chronic conditions such as heart trouble. Labor turnover rates show that absentee rates of women have been dropping as a higher proportion of older workers enter the labor force. The separation rates for men and women factory workers in 1968 were 5.2 and 4.4 percent respectively. Occupational mobility was greater for men than for women; only 7 percent of the women but 10 percent of the men held a job in a different occupation in January 1966 than in January 1965. The average worklife of women tripled from 1900 to 1960 and increased by nearly one-third from 1950-60. The expected worklife of women was found to be dependent upon marital status and number of children. A woman who gets married at age 20 has a worklife expectancy ranging from 25 years if she has one child to 17 years if she has four or more children. (BC)

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facts about WOMEN'S ABSENTEEISM and LABOR TURNOVER

August 1969

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR Wage and Labor Standards Administration

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
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FOREWORD

Interest in the comparative costs of employing men and women workers has been heightened by recent efforts to extend and enforce the principles of equal pay and equal opportunity in employment. Allegations of differences in costs are made to justify differential treatment.

This report summarizes the latest facts available about certain factors affecting labor costs; namely, absenteeism, labor turnover, job tenure, and labor mobility. The cost differentials are shown to be insignificant. The favorable findings for women workers emphasize the importance of judging work performance on the basis of individual achievement rather than of sex.

Jean A. Wells, Special Assistant to the Director, prepared the report, superseding "What About Women's Absenteeism and Labor Turnover?" published in 1965.

Elizabeth Duncan Koontz

Director, Women's Bureau

Women workers have favorable records of attendance and labor turnover when compared with men employed at similar job levels and under similar circumstances. This conclusion is supported by a careful analysis of various impartially collected statistics on absenteeism and labor turnover which also indicates that the skill level of the job, the age of the worker, the worker's length of service with the employer, and the worker's record of job stability--all provide better clues to an understanding of differences in work performance than does the mere fact that the worker is a man or a woman.

These data contradict some generalizations about the comparative labor costs of men and women. However, such generalizations are based on studies which point to the sex of the worker as the major determining factor in situations where numerous other factors have much more influence.

Before examining details of studies that consider comparable characteristics of workers, however, it is pertinent to cite the overall averages of data compiled by official or independent agencies. Even these show smaller net differences in the work records of men and women than frequently are suggested.

Overall Averages of Absenteeism

A Public Health Service study 1/ of worktime lost by persons 17 years of age and over because of illness or injury shows an average of 5.6 days lost by women and 5.3 days lost by men during the calendar year 1967. Significant differences were noted between men and women in the amount of time lost because of acute or chronic illness. Women lost an average of 3.7 workdays because of acute illness, whereas men averaged just 3.3 days away from work for this reason. On the other hand, men were more likely than women to be absent because of chronic conditions such as heart trouble, arthritis, rheumatism, and orthopedic impairment.

Another analysis also has indicated that women's illnesses usually keep them away from work for shorter periods than men's illnesses do. The Health Information Foundation of the University of Chicago 2/ studied the total loss to the American economy from work absences that occurred because of illness or injury between July 1959 and June 1960. Since women lost more worktime because of acute conditions and men because of chronic conditions, the study found that the total financial loss caused by women's absences was about the same as that caused by men's.

NOTE 1.--This report provides the latest data available as of June 1969.

NOTE 2.--Footnotes refer to sources listed on pages 8 and 9.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, in its monthly survey of the labor force, records the incidence of illness but not its duration. During an average week in 1968, 1.7 percent of women workers and 1.5 percent of men workers were absent from work because of illness.3/ In addition, an average of 1.2 percent of the women and 1 percent of the men did not report to work for other reasons, excluding vacations. This survey does not give the full story, of course, since women have, on the average, shorter periods of absences than men.

Overall Averages of Labor Turnover

Available statistics on labor turnover also indicate that the net differences in job-leaving of men and women are generally small--even when considered on an overall basis.

Labor turnover rates, which refer to the movement of employees among firms, consist of both hiring and separation rates. The average turnover rates for men and women factory workers in 1968, collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on a quarterly basis,4/ are:

	Rate per 100 employees	
Type of labor turnover	Women	Men
Accessions (hires)	5.3	4.4
Separations (total)	5.2	4.4
Quits	2.6	2.2
Layoffs and other involuntary separations	2.6	2.2

Comparison of these quit rates with those analyzed in an earlier study 5/ shows a narrowing of the gap between the rates of men and women. The fact that women have become relatively less inclined to quit their jobs than they were formerly is due probably to the higher proportion of older women in the work force and the increased interest of women in continuous employment.

A study of occupational mobility by the Bureau of Labor Statistics 6/ indicates that men are more frequent occupation changers than women. According to that study, only 7 percent of the women but 10 percent of the men held a different occupation in January 1966 than in January 1965. Movement between occupations was greater among young workers than among mature ones. In the 18- and 19-year-old group, more than 1 out of 4 girls and almost 1 out of 3 boys had worked in more than one occupation in 1965. Among those workers 35 years or older, fewer than 4 percent of the women and 6 percent of the men had changed occupations.

The seeming inconsistency between the labor turnover rates and the occupational mobility percentages of the two studies made by the Bureau of Labor Statistics is explained by their different coverage. The study of turnover rates referred to job changes of factory workers only. The study of mobility rates, on the other hand, measured all occupational changes but not job changes within the same occupational classification. In addition, the latter figures exclude workers who left jobs in 1965 and had not obtained new ones by January 1966, either because they were unsuccessful in their jobhunting or had voluntarily left the labor force. Since there are relatively more women than men in this category, the figures for women's occupational mobility tend to be slightly understated.

Geographic labor mobility was also found to be somewhat less among women workers than men workers in a study made by the Social Security Administration.7/ Between 1957 and 1960, an average of 6.3 percent of women workers but 7.7 percent of men workers changed the region of their main job. The extent of regional movement among white women workers (6.4 percent) and Negro women workers (5.3 percent) was exceeded by both white men workers (7.8 percent) and Negro men workers (7.3 percent).

Another indication of women's increasing stability in the work force is revealed in trend figures on the worklife expectancy of women, as compiled by the Department of Labor.8/ These figures show that the average number of years a woman works had more than tripled from 1900 to 1960 and had increased by almost one-third in the decade 1950-60. Worklife expectancy for those women born in 1900 averaged 6.3 years; in 1940, 12.1 years; in 1950, 15.2 years; and in 1960, 20.1 years. In each case, the percentage increase in women's average worklife expectancy far exceeded that of their average life expectancy.

The expected worklife of a woman is closely related to her marital status and the number of children she has.9/ In the large group of women who enter the labor force by age 20, the relatively small number who never marry have a worklife expectancy of 45 years. This is about 10 years longer than for those women in the group who marry but have no children and about 2 to 3 years longer than for those who become widowed or divorced. For the large number of married women with children, worklife expectancy declines with the higher number of children and the later timing of the last child. A woman marrying at age 20 has a worklife expectancy ranging from 25 years if she has just one child to 17 years if she has four or more children.

Studies of Comparable Characteristics

Several studies provide insight into the job stability of men and women by comparing those who hold similar jobs or have similar employment characteristics. These studies present a much more favorable picture of women's worklife than frequently is realized and support the contention that hiring decisions of employers generally are based on factors other than the relative labor costs of men and women.

Job tenure. In its study of the job tenure of American workers,10/ the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that continuous employment in the current job as of January 1966 averaged 2.8 years for women and 5.2 years for men. In comparable age groups, job stability was as great for single women as for all men. In fact, among those 45 years of age and over, single women averaged more time on the same job (15.5 years) than all men in the same age group (13.1 years).

Workers with the shortest job tenure were typically youth and married women. Young workers 14 to 19 years old--boys as well as girls--had spent an average of less than 1 year on their current job. The average job tenure of married women was generally shorter than that of single women in all age groups except the youngest (14-24 years). The job attachment of married women was greater for each age group, with the longest period (6.4 years) reported for those 45 years of age and over.

Illness absenteeism. Detailed statistics of illness absenteeism were provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to the U.S. Public Health Service from the monthly survey of the labor force for the period July 1959 to June 1960. The analysis 11/ compared men and women employed as civilian wage and salary workers by major occupational group, industry, type of employment, and type of manufacturing industry. On an average workday during that year, when illness rates were adjusted for age, relatively more women (1.6 percent) than men (1.3 percent) were absent from work because of illnesses lasting a workweek or more. However, among certain groups--for example, clerical workers and government workers--women had a lower rate of illness absence than men.

When sick absence days for the period July 1959 to June 1961 were analyzed by the U.S. Public Health Service 12/ and adjusted to eliminate the effects of marital status as well as age on sickness absences, they showed fewer sick days per year for single women (3.9 days) than for single men (4.3 days). Within comparable age groups, single women used more sick leave than single men below 35 years of age but used less sick leave at 35 years and over.

Among "ever married persons," however, there were more days of sick absence for women (6.1 days) than men (4.7 days) when compared by the total age-adjusted data as well as by individual age groups. It was thought that women's greater responsibility for childrearing and probably their lesser dependency on their own jobs for economic support might explain the relatively higher sick absence of the "ever married women."

Labor turnover. A private study 13/ conducted among 65 large chemical and pharmaceutical laboratories revealed only moderate differences in the labor turnover of men and women chemists when they were grouped by type of degree required for the grade of work performed. A majority of the surveyed laboratories reported that in comparisons made on this basis, women's turnover rates were "about the same" as men's. No more than 10 percent of the laboratories reported them "much higher." The overall turnover rates were much less favorable for women than for men "mainly because women are disproportionately represented at the lowest level, where turnover is highest for both sexes." It is significant that directors of many of the largest laboratories said that differentials in turnover were not sufficiently great to be a deciding factor in employment of women.

Two studies have focused attention directly on factors which might explain the consistently high turnover rates of hospital nurses. One study, published by the Industrial Relations Center of Iowa State University,14/ surveyed staff registered nurses in several large general hospitals to learn specifically about their turnover, their propensity to leave, and their absenteeism. This investigation indicated that inadequate definitions of the nurses' role in the organization, poor communication and coordination, and unreasonable work pressures all had an adverse influence on the nurses' turnover and, to a lesser extent, on their absenteeism.

The second study of nurses also suggested that hospitals might look more closely at their methods of operation to learn some of the reasons for nurses' high turnover rates. Nurses leaving one sample hospital over a 15-month period were mailed exit questionnaires by three researchers at Western Reserve University.15/ The majority (69 percent) of reasons given for leaving were not related to job situations and in most cases were involuntary ones, such as pregnancy, illness, retirement, or moves to another city. The primary reasons cited for quitting voluntarily were: nature of work (10 percent), lack of promotion (7 percent), supervision and human relations (6 percent), to get new experience (4 percent), and other reasons (4 percent).

The survey report of the Western Reserve researchers contained these comments on the lack of job challenge felt by the nurses who had voluntarily quit their jobs:

> Some of the respondents, dissatisfied with what they were doing as a result of not using their experience and ability, left their jobs. Others left because their work was not appreciated or recognized, because of lack of advancement possibilities, or to get new experience somewhere else. These individuals did not find a chance to achieve what they expected. Their work did not satisfy their needs for what may be called self-actualization and psychological growth.

Federal employees' absenteeism. A Public Health Service analysis 16/ of the number of absences reported because of illness by a sample of employees in one large Federal agency corroborated the theory that employees in high-level jobs generally had fewer absences than those at lower levels, regardless of the sex of the worker. Thus, the generalization made in the report that women employees had more absences than men employees was based on the overall data, which did not take account of the fact that relatively more women than men were employed in the low grades. In addition, it was found that women employees with children generally had a greater number of absences than those without children. As a result, differences in the incidence of illness absenteeism varied much more among the women employees than among the men employees.

Since this report did not include statistical data concerning the length of each absence period--generally found to be longer for men than women--it presented only a partial story of the illness absenteeism of Federal employees in one agency.

A U.S. Civil Service Commission study 17/ of sick leave records in 1961 showed relatively small difference in the total amount of sick leave averaged by women and men Federal workers--9.6 days for women and 7.9 days for men. But even this difference narrowed in most instances when comparisons were made of women and men with similar salaries, ages, or years of service.18/ For example, in 1961 among those earning $9,000 to $10,000 a year, 6.9 days of sick leave was the average for women and 6.3 days for men.

The highest average numbers of sick days occurred among those in the lowest salary levels--the levels where women workers are concentrated. Two groups of women had less sick leave, on the average, than their male counterparts: those 60 years of age and over (10.5 days for women, 11 days for men) and those with more than 30 years of Federal service (10.7 days for women and 11.3 days for men).

A study made by the Civil Service Commission 19/ especially for the President's Commission on the Status of Women covered voluntary separations of full-time career employees between December 16, 1962, and February 2, 1963. On an overall basis, the relative separation (turnover) rate was about 2½ times greater for women than for men. The higher rate for women can be explained by the larger proportion of women than men who are under 25 years of age, who have lower grade clerical jobs, and who have fewer years of Federal service--all factors associated with high turnover. When the data for men and for women were compared separately by age group, by broad occupational group, and by length of service, differences in their relative turnover rates decreased.

French workers' absenteeism. The importance of considering job levels and other factors in any study of absenteeism is further emphasized in an international report 20/ on women industrial workers in Paris, France. The following quotation is from that report:

> Detailed study of absentee figures for large numbers of employees of both sexes and at all levels of skill discloses that the comparatively high proportion of women at the lower levels of the occupational scale (even in countries where the employment of women is a long-standing tradition) goes a long way towards explaining their frequent irregularity at work. Highly trained women occupying responsible and skilled positions are seldom absent, even if they have several children to bring up.

Conclusion. Meaningful comparisons of absenteeism and labor turnover of women and men workers must take into consideration similar job levels as well as other factors such as age and length of service. Many of the critical generalities frequently voiced not only exaggerate overall differences but also compare dissimilar groups of men and women.

Footnotes

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